

Irregular Conflict and the Wicked Problem Dilemma

Strategies of Imperfection

BY FRANKLIN D. KRAMER

Irregular conflict is neither neat nor fair. Definitionally, it is hard to describe, including as it does conflicts ranging from Somalia to Bosnia to Sierra Leone to Colombia to Iraq to Afghanistan (to say nothing of Sudan, the Philippines, or Yemen). *Hybrid*, *counterinsurgency* (COIN), *stability operations*, *counterterrorism*, and *civil war* have all been utilized as descriptions, often in combination. But if defining irregular conflict is difficult, even more difficult is knowing how to respond, especially for an outside intervener like the United States. Doctrine has now been developed, but in practice the context of an irregular conflict is generally so complex and contradictory that it is difficult to put the full doctrine effectively into practice.

Successful resolution demands strategies that take account of the interdependent, evolving, and multistakeholder nature of irregular conflicts—factors that make such conflicts so-called wicked problems¹—and can produce satisfactory results despite imperfections in motivations, capabilities, and techniques. This article proposes to engage in that discussion—how to implement successful strategies of imperfection in the face of the wicked problem set of issues that irregular conflicts regularly generate.

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Current Strategy and Its Challenges

The development of doctrine for irregular conflict has a substantial historical background, ranging from Carl von Clausewitz's chapter on the people's wars² to the U.S. Marine Corps' Small Wars Manual of the first half of the 20th century³ to David Galula's nonpareil Counterinsurgency Warfare.⁴ In the last 6 years, however, energized particularly by the requirements of Iraq and Afghanistan, a large body of doctrinal analysis has been developed—and it is useful to set forth the key tenets of that doctrine so as to understand why successful resolution of irregular conflicts has proved so difficult.

Much of the analysis has been undertaken in the context of counterinsurgency—not surprisingly, since Iraq and Afghanistan presented such problems. Three very capable efforts are those set forth in the U.S. Department of Defense Counterinsurgency manual; the “Lessons Learned—Counterinsurgency Programming” set forth by the Office of Transition Initiatives, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); and by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), “Working

also addressed, including the need for granular intelligence, the proper use of measured force, and the importance of putting the host nation in the lead. The third DFID effort reflects the broad approach undertaken by the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) including, among other points, the need to align with local priorities and the value of shared understanding and effective coordination. All of these are very sensible propositions—but despite their general good sense, it nonetheless often has proved difficult to achieve adequate success in irregular operations.

The analysis that follows suggests that the inability regularly to achieve satisfactory results—a difficulty that we would deem unacceptable in so-called conventional combat—results from a combination of factors, including unarticulated assumptions, substantial deviations between doctrine and practice, and significant gaps in capacities that are often glossed over in planning and execution. Frequently, problems are defined too narrowly, motivations of critical stakeholders misperceived, and complex interdependencies oversimplified. Recognizing that there is a problem, there is a strong inclination to take action and put programs in place despite these limitations—but then the programs and actions fail precisely because of those limits. The thesis of this article is that taking real-world imperfections into account will allow for the use of strategies designed to compensate for these imperfections. Such an approach will be more contextually granular and more multifaceted and time-phased than often is now the case. “Successes” will also incorporate the concept of imperfection and be more attuned to the context of the conflict at issue.

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Effectively in Conflict-affected and Fragile Situations.” Each of first two efforts underscores the importance of governmental legitimacy; security for the populace; unity of effort in multiple activities, including security, governance, and economics; and long-term commitment. Sensible tactical requirements are

Afghan citizens use road while U.S. Marine Corps combat engineers make road repairs in Helmand Province

U.S. Marine Corps (Daniel H. Woodall)



Problems of Doctrine. To understand the difficulties caused by the limitations of doctrine, a good place to begin is to look briefly at the efforts of the Counterinsurgency manual, the USAID principles, and the DFID approach. Though other militaries are significantly engaged in irregular operations, when the United States is involved it will generally lead the military effort, and so the Counterinsurgency manual offers useful insight into the current developed world military approach. In the civil arena, by contrast, the United States may not always be the most significant player, but it usually is substantial, and it has developed a civil doctrine for counterinsurgency that is reflected in the USAID analysis. The DFID effort, as noted, reflects the general OECD approach, so it is a useful surrogate for non-U.S. analyses. However, as experienced as the practitioners are who wrote these analyses, even these excellent approaches fall prey to the traps of assumptions, deviations, and capacity gaps.

The Counterinsurgency manual sets forth multiple lines of operation for the U.S. military in the field, including security, governance, economics, and strategic communications.⁵ The manual assumes competency in, among other areas, the ability to collect useful intelligence, the ability to train host nation forces, and the ability to have a unity of effort. However, it gives virtually no consideration to the problems of corruption, limitations on host nation human capacity, and difficulties of eliminating sanctuary. Overall, the manual includes thoughtful analyses, but it nonetheless falls prey to a number of fundamental traps. The difficulties of unity of effort are understated. The impact of capacity gaps is understated or overlooked, including the difficulty of useful intelligence collection, the history of multiple ineffective training efforts, and the competition for what are often very limited human resources. The full set of problems of an irregular

conflict is too narrowly defined (for example, the often divergent interests between the host nation and its neighbors).

The USAID Lessons Learned seeks to identify practical obstacles—for example, singling out “Corruption is a killer.”⁶ However, inherent to the USAID analysis seems to be the assumption that, as a result of the identification of problems, the problem will be solvable. For example, the Lessons Learned suggests the need to restore trust in “credible local institutions” and the importance of “flexibility to change course and scale up and/or down operations depending on changing security and the political situation.”⁷ In reality, often it is precisely the absence of credible institutions and of flexibility in programming that undercuts well-intentioned efforts. Once again, the full nature of the problem is understated because of unarticulated assumptions.

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The DFID approach is sensibly cautionary. However, it, like the USAID effort, seems to assume that identification of the problem will allow for resolution. Alignment of interests is a key point. In an irregular conflict situation, it is not at all clear that all participants share the interest in ending the conflict or in making the state effective or, to the extent that they do, that they have a shared approach to that end. Similarly, it is one thing to desire coordination or to avoid harm and quite another to accomplish those ends.

The coordination point deserves emphasis. Coordination does not come easily, and this limitation becomes even more obvious

when it is recognized—as the DFID effort points out—that coordination is required at a broader multilateral level among the United States, the host nation, and the intervener community, each of the latter having multiple elements. The absence of a generally agreed doctrine essentially means that for each irregular conflict, the United States and its allies and partners must reinvent organizational and other working arrangements, at a minimum slowing and most often undercutting the achievement of effective results.

This last point raises specifically, as do each of the publications discussed above, the much broader and highly critical element of what might be called the “assumption of implementation.” That assumption is pervasive. Although it has received only limited notice,⁸ the United States has published a “U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide.”⁹ Much akin to the Counterinsurgency manual, it calls for a “whole of government” approach, with security, governance, economics, and information elements. But while it sensibly describes the goals of each such effort, its discussion of implementation is extremely limited,¹⁰ even though it is the very issue of effective implementation that is at the heart of the problems of irregular conflict.

Problems of Practice. The problems of doctrine discussed above would not be particularly consequential if the counterinsurgency campaigns (or other irregular conflict responses) were more effective. But the practice of counterinsurgency is not filled with obvious success. One recent study, reviewing 30 counterinsurgency efforts during the years 1978 to 2006, found 22 failures and only 8 successes by the counterinsurgents.¹¹ There are many reasons for this, and a look at recent U.S. activities, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, illuminates

some of the significant difficulties. Here are some important considerations.

The center is broken. Irregular conflicts arise for reasons, and the failure of central political institutions to meet the requirements of the citizenry is generally at the heart of the problem. That failure may arise from incapacity or unwillingness or a combination of the two. The general approach of the United States to irregular conflict strategy, however, is to seek to work with the central government. But the degree of incapacity or the unwillingness to establish the degree of “legitimacy” we would deem appropriate is often not acknowledged. A central government that either cannot or will not pursue an effective irregular conflict strategy makes for a very difficult partner. It is that type of partner, however, that the United States finds itself paired with quite regularly.

Key leaders have divergent goals from the United States. In an important memorandum to President George W. Bush at a pivotal time in the Iraq conflict, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley wrote: “We returned from Iraq convinced we need to determine if Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is both willing and able to rise above the sectarian agendas being promoted by others. Do we and Prime Minister Maliki share the same vision for Iraq?”¹² In Afghanistan, similar questions have been directed toward President Hamid Karzai.¹³ Host nation leadership will, however, be a key factor in the resolution of an irregular conflict. As the Counterinsurgency manual states, “viable local leaders”¹⁴ are required elements of success. But, importantly, what makes a host nation leader viable from a political perspective may not fit well with the U.S. strategy for the conflict. Those differences need to be advertently considered.

Provincial and local government is ineffective. A natural inclination in irregular conflict, where the center is often ineffective,

is to look to lower level governance, at the provincial and/or local level. The concept is sensible—local officials may have much better ties with the population, and certain important services, such as police or sewage, need to be delivered at the local level. The concept often founders on the limits of human capital at the local level or on the absence of resources. One frequent result of irregular conflict is a diaspora

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of some of the more talented and educated citizens of the host country, thereby compounding the problem of limited human capital.

Corruption is pervasive and blocks productive action. Corruption often exists throughout the host nation governing structures. In Afghanistan, there are multiple stories headlining “pervasive graft, starting at the top” and saying that “predatory corruption . . . is rampant at every level of Afghan society.”¹⁵ At higher levels, multiple senior officials are said to be engaged.¹⁶ At the lower levels, police and other governmental officials can be the problem. For example, in March 2007, the Canadian former deputy commander of the combined training command stated that the “last thing people want to see is the police showing up. They are part of the problem. They do not provide security for the people—they are robbers of the people.”¹⁷ Robert Perito of the United States Institute of Peace has written:

For many Afghans, the police were identified with demands for bribes, illegal taxes,

*and various kinds of human rights violations. They were also known to use house searches as an opportunity to shake down the occupants and steal their possessions. Corrupt police practices were felt most directly by the poorest members of society: taxi and truck drivers, traders, small businessmen, and farmers.*¹⁸

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Criminal enterprises and other groups undercut legitimate structures, including through the use of violence. In many irregular conflict situations, criminal enterprises have occupied a significant place in the functional economy and social structure. They are among the nonstate actors with significant capabilities for organized violence. Other such “nonstate security actors” include warlords, militias, and private security firms. Sometimes, these latter even provide protective services to the government or in the economy, but their fundamental characteristics are that they have effective immunity from governmental control.¹⁹ Perhaps even more importantly, they often benefit from the continuation of the conflict

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rather than its resolution. Once again, the critical point is that any strategy has to recognize these issues.

Insurgents receive sanctuary and support from outsiders, and this allows them to maintain their efforts even after military setbacks.

The importance of outside support to insurgents is hardly a new issue. The United States has been on both the receiving and the giving side of this issue—in Vietnam, where the support came from the North and from outside countries, and in Afghanistan in dealing with the Soviet Union, where the United States provided much of the support in cooperation with Pakistan. More recent examples of the importance of outside support and sanctuary include Iranian support to Hizballah and sanctuary in Pakistan for the Taliban. The larger point is that understanding the role sanctuary can play will always be key to developing an effective strategy.

The outside interveners lack good understanding of the host nation and have poor intelligence capabilities. The clearest statement of this deficiency has come from the U.S. military intelligence chief in Afghanistan. In a now well-known public article, Major General Michael Flynn wrote:

Eight years into the war in Afghanistan, the U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate and the people they seek to persuade. Ignorant of local economics and landowners, hazy about who the powerbrokers are and how they might be influenced, incurious about the correlations between various development projects and the levels of cooperation

*among villagers, and disengaged from people in the best position to find answers—whether aid workers or Afghan soldiers—U.S. intelligence officers and analysts can do little but shrug in response to high level decision-makers seeking the knowledge, analysis, and information they need to wage a successful counterinsurgency.*²⁰

Intervener training often does not produce effective host nation security forces.

The training effectiveness problem can be a result of multiple issues. Resource limitations can be a key causal factor; a clear statement on this point came from the current head of training in Afghanistan. In his recent report, Lieutenant General William Caldwell stated, “Before November 2009 there were insufficient resources to properly conduct the [training] mission.”²¹ A second factor can be the design of training itself. In an earlier interview, General Caldwell was a little more colorful, saying with respect to police training, “We weren’t doing it right. . . . It is still beyond my comprehension.”²² In Iraq, a review group led by General James Jones found the Iraqi Police Service and the national police to be incapable and ineffective; relevant factors included underresourcing, sectarianism, and the dysfunctional nature of the Ministry of Interior under which they served.²³ Of course, training can produce effective units—General Caldwell has become more positive concerning Afghan forces, and General Jones had concluded that the Iraqi military was becoming more effective, which subsequent events further demonstrated—but progress is all too often quite slow. The larger point is the need to take account of all factors when designing training, not just to assume that any effort will be effective.

Civil coordination is often limited, undercutting the accomplishment of key tasks.

The civil coordination problem is illustrated by the discussion in the September 2010 White House report on the Afghanistan/Pakistan strategy, which stated that “important international efforts to improve coordination and align activities have not progressed. The Post Crisis Needs Assessment designed to assess

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the needs of the conflict-affected areas in the northwest [of Pakistan] and establish a plan for reconstruction has stalled due to U.N. [United Nations] and World Bank disagreements over its scope.”²⁴

What emerges from this discussion is that irregular conflicts are difficult for different types of reasons. On the one hand, there are problems of capacity (for example, broken center and training failures), motivations (leader differences with interveners, desire of some groups like criminal enterprises to profit from prolonging conflict situation), and organization (such as ineffective coordination among interveners and with host nation groups). Each of these may have a specific linear solution, but there are two related problems that make achieving those solutions more difficult. The first is to understand the full scope of the overall issues related to any particular problem of capacity, motivation, or organization. The second is to understand the full irregular conflict context, and, in particular, that individual difficulties often interact with one another, combining to add to the overall difficulty of achieving adequate resolutions. Those issues—understatement of

the problem set and the multifaceted interactive nature of the problem—are characteristic of wicked problems, as further discussed below.

Reconceptualizing Irregular Conflict as a Wicked Problem

Understanding Wicked Problems. The discussion of the problems of doctrine and of practice suggests, as it should, the degree of difficulty in achieving successful resolution of an irregular conflict. Complexity is obviously a factor, but as suggested above and for the reasons more fully discussed below, the issues go beyond complexity and into the realm of

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even more difficult types of problems deemed “wicked problems.” The distinction between complex problems and wicked problems has been set forward as follows: “[C]omplex problems [are problems for which] problem solvers agree on what the problem is, [but] there is no consensus on how to solve it. . . . In [the wicked problem] instance, there is no agreement on the problem or its solution.”²⁵ While there are multiple definitions of the elements of a wicked problem, one useful analysis in the governmental context put forward by the Australian Public Service Commission includes the following as key elements:

- ❖ difficult to clearly define
- ❖ many interdependencies and often multicausal
- ❖ attempts to address often lead to unforeseen consequences

- ❖ often not stable, problem keeps evolving
- ❖ have no clear solution, may never be solved
- ❖ solutions not right or wrong but rather better or worse or good enough
- ❖ socially complex, involve multiple stakeholders
- ❖ hardly ever the responsibility of one organization
- ❖ involve changing behavior, necessary to motivate individuals.²⁶

An important issue in the handling of wicked problems is avoiding dealing too narrowly with them. The Australian Public Service Commission analysis stated: “There is a variety of ways that organisations try to tame wicked problems by handling them too narrowly. The most common way is *locking down the problem definition*. This often involves addressing a sub-problem that can be solved.”²⁷ But, as the commission noted, that often leads to a failure of the overall solution:

The handling of wicked problems requires holistic rather than linear thinking. This is thinking capable of grasping the big picture, including the interrelationships between the full range of causal factors and policy objectives. By their nature, the wicked issues are imperfectly understood, and so initial planning boundaries that are drawn too narrowly may lead to a neglect of what is important in handling the wicked issues. It is in this unforeseen interconnection that policy problems grow and policy failures arise. “There is an ever-present danger in handling wicked issues that they are handled too narrowly.”²⁸

As the foregoing suggests, one of the most critical aspects of a wicked problem is that



U.S. Air Force (Rylan K. Albright)

Servicemembers with Provincial Reconstruction Team gather information on needs of residents in Farah Province, Afghanistan

resolution requires a different approach to dealing with problems: as one analysis stated, “Experts voice warnings that traditional linear methods of problem solving (e.g., specify the problem, gather and analyze data, formulate a solution, implement solution) do not seem to be working.”²⁹ The Australian Public Service Commission analysis expanded on this point:

*The consensus in the literature, however, is that such a linear, traditional approach to policy formulation is an inadequate way to work with wicked policy problems. This is because part of the wickedness of an issue lies in the interactions between causal factors, conflicting policy objectives and disagreement over the appropriate solution. Linear thinking is inadequate to encompass such interactivity and uncertainty. The shortcomings of a linear approach are also due to the social complexity of wicked problems. The fact is that a true understanding of the problem generally requires the perspective of multiple organisations and stakeholders, and that any package of measures identified as a possible solution usually requires the involvement, commitment and coordination of multiple organisations and stakeholders to be delivered effectively.*³⁰

Irregular conflicts generally will merit the description of a wicked problem. Such conflicts are often multicausal, unstable, and present problems that keep evolving. They are socially complex, involving multiple stakeholders and many interdependencies. They often have no clear solution, and, in any event, solutions often are not right or wrong but rather better or worse or good enough. Frequently, solutions require changing behavior, where it is necessary to motivate individuals,

and attempts to generate solutions can lead to unforeseen consequences. Finally, it is hardly ever the responsibility of one organization to provide solutions.³¹

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Resolving Wicked Problems. That wicked problems are difficult with no clear solutions does not mean that they cannot be resolved. *Resolution* in this context means a strategy that reasonably copes with the issue and halts enough of the antagonistic and destructive behaviors in which parties are engaged to be deemed “good enough.” A useful analysis by Nancy Roberts set forth three such coping mechanisms, which she called “authoritative,” “competitive,” and “collaborative.” As will be further discussed, each has drawbacks and will have to be adapted to fit the irregular conflict context.

Authoritative strategies involve putting “problem solving into the hands of a few stakeholders who have the authority to define a problem and come up with a solution.”³² As Roberts points out, authoritative solutions have drawbacks for wicked problems: “Authorities and experts can be wrong—wrong about the problem and wrong about the solution.”³³

Competitive strategies are a second way of coping with wicked problems. Roberts states: “Competitive strategies have a long history. Whether they have been played out on the battlefield, in politics or in the market, stakeholders following this strategy assume a ‘zero-sum game.’ If my opponents win the right to define the problem and choose the

solution, then I lose. If I win the right, my opponents lose. A win-lose mind-set thus permeates interactions.”

Roberts notes that the value of competitive strategies depends on the ability to achieve a significant degree of power:

*Central to the pursuit of competitive strategies to deal with wicked problems is the search for power. To the extent a competitor can build a power base larger than his opponents, using whatever tactics his ethics and morality permit, he can increase his chances to win and define the problem and solutions in a way he sees fit. Power, after all, is the ability to get what one wants against resistance. . . . When a player wins out over the competition and can sustain those wins over time, then power is concentrated in his hands. Concentration of power, as noted earlier, enables him to resort to authoritative strategies instead of dissipating his resources in the competitive fray.*³⁴

Of course, if each of the various stakeholders has enough power, then the competitive approach only will cause the problem to continue.

Roberts’s third strategy is called collaborative:

[C]ollaboration is premised on the principle that by joining forces parties can accomplish more as a collective than they can achieve by acting as independent agents. At the core of collaboration is a “win-win” view of problem solving. Rather than play a “zero-sum game” that seeks to distribute “pie shares” based on winners and losers, they assume a “variable sum game” that seeks to “enlarge the pie” for all parties involved. Alliances, partnerships, and joint ventures are all

*variations of the theme as they find expression in government, business, and international relations.*³⁵

Roberts notes that collaborative solutions can have difficulties:

*Disadvantages of collaboration also are well known. Adding stakeholders to any problem solving effort increases “transaction costs.” There are more meetings, more people with whom to communicate and get agreement—interactions that can take a great deal of effort. Sorting out which operating procedures and whose norms of conduct will prevail takes time. As the number of stakeholders grows, so does the difficulty of achieving synergy. Skills of collaboration are limited, too, especially among people who work in a traditional bureaucracy with a strong hierarchy that limits participation and team-based approaches to problem solving and decision making. Collaboration requires practice; it is a learned skill. If members do not have these skills, they need to acquire them and that takes additional time and resources. Then in the worst case, collaboration can end poorly. Dialogue can turn into debate and debate into protracted conflict with little to show for the hours of preparation and meetings. Positions can harden making agreement even more difficult to attain in the future. There are no guarantees that the outcomes of collaboration will be satisfactory to everyone.*³⁶

Roberts was not analyzing in the context of actual conflict. As suggested above, however, a judicious combination of each of these strategies can allow for the prospect of resolving irregular conflicts. The key to success will

be to blend authoritative, competitive, and collaborative strategies to achieve the “good enough” solution. But the content of the concepts must be fitted to the demands of irregular conflict. Collaborative strategies will involve the negotiation between and among initially opposing interests with no trust and no sense of “win-win.” Competitive strategies will try both incentives and coercion, including force, to change the calculus of stakeholders. Authoritative strategies will most often be a penultimate result arrived at from a mix of

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actions, rather than an early agreed common approach. The discussion following analyzes how such strategies have been applied in irregular conflict contexts.

How Have Irregular Conflict Winners Succeeded?

Irregular conflicts, like wicked problems in general, have the characteristic that they lack clear real-world solutions—a key point being that different stakeholders look at the problem differently and have different desired outcomes, yet influence one another and affect and evolve the ongoing situation. Despite that degree of difficulty and there have been irregular conflict problems that have resulted in at least tenable solutions from the U.S. perspective. As a rough categorization, Bosnia, El Salvador, Iraq, and Colombia could be included in the positive balance. As the discussion below demonstrates, those efforts succeeded because of an

ability to be adaptive—to change strategies and methods of implementation—and to be able to combine strategies over time so as to meet the wicked problem conundrum.

Bosnia is a good starting place. The fighting and destruction, including several hundred thousand deaths, continued for approximately 3 years. The Croatian military was then able to score significant military victories, and this military effort was enhanced by North Atlantic Treaty Organization airpower. Changes in military position were also accompanied by a significant exhaustion of some of the parties—that is, a desire to step back from the demands of conflict and a feeling that conflict no longer provided a way forward. The Dayton Accords, which brought together relevant stakeholders under the leadership of the United States, were able to create a political agreement after which there was no significant violence.

Bosnia remains a problem today because there has not been sufficient progress beyond Dayton

The Bosnia resolution was very much military driven and was followed by very effective negotiations. It was not a “clear, hold, build” effort. Good governance, economics and development, and strategic communications did not play major roles in the resolution. Bosnia remains a problem today because there has not been sufficient progress beyond Dayton—but its resolution has been good enough for it not to be on the list of significant U.S. concerns. In wicked problem terms, there was a competitive approach—fighting—followed by

collaboration—negotiations—followed by an authoritative solution—the Dayton Accords.

El Salvador shares many of the characteristics of Bosnia. El Salvador was a situation where, first, there was an intense security contest resulting for the most part in a standoff. Over time, there was improved governance and an improved security position by the government, including greater focus on protection of the population. Exhaustion of the contending parties was also a factor. Ultimately, there was a negotiated settlement, brokered by the United Nations, that provided for the insurgents to have involvement in the governing structures but that more generally favored the government.

El Salvador is a good example of adaptation and persistence. The changes in approach by the government to security and governance, utilizing better practices for each, were certainly valuable. The willingness to continue the effort through years of conflict was important. Ultimately, however, there was a reconciliation of all stakeholder interests through the negotiated settlement. In wicked problem parlance, there was first a competition, then collaboration in terms of the negotiations, and then an authoritative solution accepted by the parties.

Iraq is not a finished situation, but it appears headed toward a “good enough” resolution so that U.S. military forces have significantly drawn down and are likely to be very much further drawn down by the end of 2011. While the current situation in Iraq is far from perfect, certainly the circumstances there are far better than they were at the height of the insurgency in 2007. While there are differences of view in precisely how this came about—multiple volumes have already been written on the key elements—all seem to agree that a combination of events was important,

and there seem to have been seven interdependent and important factors. Those are the surge of U.S. forces; the decision of the tribes in Anbar Province to work with the United States and the subsequent expansion of that approach with the Sons of Iraq effort; so-called high value targeting of senior insurgent leaders; the ability of the Iraqi government, and particularly Prime Minister Maliki, to become more effective; the decision of Moqtada al Sadr to stand down his efforts; the improved capability of the Iraqi security forces; and the exhaustion from, and dislocations caused by, the sectarian killings.

Iraq started as a highly competitive situation, and the multiple factors at play made it all the more difficult. While the competition continued, two key collaborative decisions changed the landscape—the Awakening/Sons of Iraq decisions to work with the United States, and the Sadr decision not to actively provide armed opposition. Finally, the willingness of at least portions of the contending parties to turn to the political process as a source of decisionmaking has meant the use of an authoritative process toward a mechanism for what may turn out to be a “good enough” resolution.

Finally, Colombia may be the best example of a solution through competitive actions. Colombia can reasonably be thought to be an example of the “clear, hold, build” strategy³⁷ utilizing all elements of national power. Over time, this effort has significantly reduced, though not eliminated, the adverse effects of the irregular conflict. As the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found in 2008:

Since 2000, U.S. assistance has enabled the Colombians to achieve significant security advances in two key areas. First,

the government has expanded its presence throughout the country, particularly in many areas formerly dominated by illegal armed groups. Second, the government, through its counternarcotics strategy, military and police actions, and other efforts (such as its demobilization and deserter programs) has degraded the finances of illegal armed groups and weakened their operational capabilities. These advances have contributed to an improved security environment.³⁸

The Plan Colombia efforts were not simply security focused. The overall thrust of the program, reducing illicit drug operations, did not have the desired results.³⁹ However, in the social and economic areas, there were also positive efforts. Again, per the GAO:

Since fiscal year 2000, the United States has provided nearly \$1.3 billion for nonmilitary assistance to Colombia, focusing on the promotion of (1) economic and social progress and (2) the rule of law, including judicial reform. To support social and economic progress, the largest share of U.S. nonmilitary assistance has gone toward alternative development, which has been a key element of U.S. counternarcotics assistance and has bettered the lives of hundreds of thousands of Colombians. Other social programs have assisted thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and more than 30,000 former combatants. Assistance for the rule of law and judicial reform have expanded access to the democratic process for Colombian citizens, including the consolidation of state authority and the established government institutions and public services in many areas reclaimed from illegal armed groups.⁴⁰

In sum, without overstating, the Colombia effort was a multivector approach with positive results, even though all objectives were not achieved.

The most immediate conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing is thoroughly in line with both intuition and longstanding practice: there is no single way to resolve irregular conflicts. Violence, persistence, exhaustion,

solutions need to involve changing behavior, and to do so, it is necessary to motivate individuals, groups, and various types of entities

and negotiation (both internal and external) all played important roles. That fits with the concept of irregular conflict as a wicked problem—and the necessity of taking into account the difficulties, interdependencies, and “good enough” approaches that will lead to parties coming to an adequate resolution. A second lesson is that in Bosnia and El Salvador, a long period of competitive violence was precedent to the willingness to undertake a collaborative approach. Likewise, in Iraq, the Awakening was precipitated at least in part by the violence of al Qaeda against the tribes. Accordingly, if that analysis is accepted, the conclusion follows that the “clear, hold, build” approach, which is a competitive effort, may need to be buttressed by a focus on collaborative and authoritative actions, but reaching a collaborative situation is not an immediate process. This leads to the question of what causes the willingness to collaborate or to accept authoritative decisionmaking processes. The analysis below reviews key elements of generating such changed behavior, which thereby expands the elements of resolution.

Expanding the Elements of Resolution: Changing Behaviors

Internal Groups and Strategies. A fundamental characteristic of irregular conflict is the difference of view regarding both the nature of the problem and the appropriate solution held by multiple parties. In an excellent analysis, Kenneth Menkhaus made the distinction between governments that were willing but lacked capacity to deal with irregular conflicts and those that were unwilling whether or not they had the capabilities.⁴¹

However, as suggested above, a full analysis of the difficulties of irregular conflict must be broader and more granular than simply a focus on host nation governmental capacities and intent. The analysis must be broader since the insurgent groups and the neighboring countries, among others, must be taken into account. They are critical stakeholders who will have significant sway on how the conflict may be resolved. The analysis also must be more granular, since within the host nation, multiple power centers exist. Not only the central government, but other governmental levels as well as nongovernmental entities—ranging from individuals to social institutions to businesses to ethnic/tribal units to warlord/militias/criminals—are of consequence, and often in multiple configurations.

Thus, while the distinction between willing and unwilling is a useful start, the real question becomes how to move the unwilling into the willing column and how to include enough of the different power groups to bring about a resolution. This is part of the wicked problem—solutions need to involve changing behavior, and to do so, it is necessary to motivate individuals, groups, and various types of entities. The existing doctrinal

analysis suggests that the straightforward aspects of improved security, economics, and governance would be sufficient to generate adequate motivation. But that approach assumes a fairly homogeneous, aligned, and linear view of the world—and such commonality, alignment, and linear causality are generally absent in a wicked problem situation and almost always absent in an irregular conflict context.

Instead of an assumption, then, what will be necessary will be a more complex strategy. While contexts will cause varying specifics, the factors discussed below will be important to behavior changing and to building an interactive structure that can achieve resolution. Some of these are highly dynamic and imply further change over time based on shifting interdependence. They involve approaches to designing both the structures and the interactions among stakeholders. It is important to underscore, however, that this discussion of changing behaviors assumes a significant, persistent security effort. In each of the situations examined, security efforts were extensive. They were not sufficient to cause a satisfactory outcome—but they were necessary. With that critical understanding, at least five additional factors deserve consideration.

First, in building a strategy, it is important to find a favorable group and build on it. This is, of course, David Galula's famous advice⁴²—and it is probably the single most significant piece of advice ever offered in the irregular conflict context. Such action does a number of things. It starts with a group at least somewhat inclined in the right direction. It gives a base on which to build capacity. It puts a local face on the conflict, which can help reduce antagonism to the outside intervener.⁴³ It allows insight into at least one group of

stakeholders so plans are based on a more realistic set of considerations. It implicitly starts internal negotiations among groups, which is part of the collaborative process of resolving wicked problems.

Second, it may be important to utilize multiple structures. The task of the outside intervener will be to generate some overall resolution, and while the initial favorable group will be one key element, it is unlikely that there will be a simple one-size-fits-all “expanding oil spot” spread of common resolution throughout the competing arena and among contending parties. “Oil spot expansion” is a good approach, but it may have to be generated in multiple areas for multiple parties by multiple approaches. The Iraq example is instructive. The clear/hold strategy in

changing behaviors assumes a significant, persistent security effort

some areas, such as Anbar Province, was built around the Sunni tribes, while in others, such as Basra, it was built around the governmental forces. Of course, there is tension when multiple, sometimes competing, structures exist—but that tension is reflective of the underlying tensions of the wicked problem and cannot be wished away. Rather, what is being undertaken when a structure is built to be utilized by important stakeholders is a step in changing behavior, and the key will be to then take the multiple structures and use them to generate further steps toward a collaborative resolution. It should also be noted that, when properly balanced, multiple and sometimes competing structures can be stabilizing and frequently are used in building governance structures.⁴⁴ Ultimately, an integrated approach is the end

goal; phased along the way, however, multiple structures may be valuable.

Third, and as a corollary of the second factor, bring spoilers into structures if and when possible. Almost every irregular conflict will have its version of warlords, militias, and private security entities. All of these

wicked problems change dimensions, and as they do, a shift from fighting to interaction can be in order

exert power in some fashion. By engaging them in structures that are being generated or enhanced, there is some prospect of arriving at a collaborative solution. It is absolutely correct that such entities can take advantage of the imprimatur of state power and become excessively destructive. But the high likelihood is that they will be destructive if left alone. The goal is to first interact, then limit, then control, and then perhaps integrate or eliminate. It may be true that one or more of the groups is sufficiently destructive that it will be worse to include them, and it may be that an initial strategy is that it is best to fight with them. However true that may appear in the immediate context, it should not be forgotten that wicked problems change dimensions, and as they do, a shift from fighting to interaction can be in order. Again, in Iraq, the shift regarding the Sadr forces is illustrative.

Fourth, not only groups but also individuals need to be considered, and the factors that will affect their decisions should be taken into account. In this regard, it is particularly worthwhile to give specific attention to the considerations of the youthful part of the demographic, especially the young men who may be the best source of recruitment for the opposition. In

many societies, it will be the youth who take most seriously the calls for change and who are willing to undertake violence in its support. While economics can be a factor and providing employment, including for low-skilled persons, can reduce opportunities for opposition recruitment, there is often more to opposition than just money.⁴⁵ Taking into account cultural and societal factors and establishing structures and efforts that meet those considerations can be invaluable. As an example, participation in an insurgent group may give an individual a sense of self and place in society; bringing the individual into a structured entity that provides similar psychological benefits, such as a local defense force under governmental control, may be important to generating separation from the insurgency.

Finally, managing hatreds is likely to be part of the task. That is not so easily done. But if it is not understood to be part of the problem, success is even more unlikely. Two obvious and overlapping but necessarily fundamental points will be how to deal with ethnic or similar identities that have come to dominate not only perceptions but also actions, including the use of significant violence, and how to institutionalize political structures that will allow contending stakeholders to achieve adequately acceptable results. In dealing with these issues, pragmatic sequencing of actions that focus on issues of value to multiple contending stakeholders can be important. One useful study stated:

There are situations in which the trauma of recent violence is still so deep that, instead of addressing the sources of strife, conflict management has to be pragmatically oriented toward avoiding its new manifestations. . . . [G]iven that memories of

*violence carry such a potential for renewal of conflicts, questions can be asked about the right sequencing of steps. . . . It may be rational to start by working on issues that . . . are equally important for all groups in a local community.*⁴⁶

Another thoughtful analysis pointed out the value of not creating institutions that “are built on an assumption of intransigence—an assumption that the nature and intensity of ethnic divisions are beyond transformation.”⁴⁷ From an implementation perspective, this means that structures that require representation on an ethnic or similar basis may perpetuate rather than eliminate a conflict situation. One can, however, conceive of how an adaptive approach that does provide for such representation for a time and then changes to a more general approach might fit certain contexts.

The critical point that each of the studies makes is that actions can be sequenced and structures created that make it more likely that contending stakeholders will engage in behavior that is different from the actions and perceptions that led to the conflict situation.

Economics and Corruption. It is a common-sense perception and part of the generally accepted wisdom in dealing with irregular conflicts that economics are an important factor. For that reason as well as the economic destruction that often accompanies irregular conflict, developmental efforts usually become major activities. But the role that such actions should play in irregular conflict deserves closer review for reasons discussed below—and the analysis will show that developmental actions need to be included in the wicked problem approach—as carefully planned and integrated as military

activities—and that there are important reasons to look very closely at type, structuring, timing, and impact of economic and social efforts in the context of counterinsurgency.

As a useful starting point, it should be recognized that expectations of success of economic projects in irregular conflict situations should not be overinflated. A recent study on what explains aid project success in post-conflict situations stated, “[P]rojects started in a post-conflict environment have lower chances of success than projects implemented in a countries at peace.”⁴⁸ While that difficulty of successfully implementing projects should hardly come as a revelation, the study draws two more important conclusions.

First, it stated that “it is implementation rather than design that matters for the success of projects in [a] post-war environment,” but that the “main consequence of civil war

structures that require representation on an ethnic or similar basis may perpetuate rather than eliminate a conflict situation

. . . is a severe lack of skills,” which reduces the prospect of effective implementation.⁴⁹ The study also differentiates the success rate among types of projects. Projects focused on roads and transport as well as urban development had the most success, while engineering, mining, and education had higher probabilities of failure. One can infer—the study itself did not do this—that one reason for the differential is that road building and urban development generally allow for a greater use of unskilled labor, while engineering, mining, and education will require a greater percentage of more highly skilled persons to be effective.

But even if there is a greater success rate in certain types of projects, there is reason to doubt that most are very useful in the context of reaching an adequate resolution of an irregular conflict. A recent analysis asked, “Does . . . development-based strategy work?”⁵⁰ The more specific question was whether developmental aid in Iraq had reduced violence. The conclusion, based on statistical analysis for the period 2004–2008, was twofold. First, “much of the reconstruction aid in Iraq has not helped reduce violence,” and “spending on large projects and projects carried out primarily by foreign contractors . . . appears to have had no violence-reducing effect.”⁵¹

Second, by contrast, of the overall \$25.3 billion of reconstruction programs in the period, the \$3.1 billion spent on the military’s Commander’s Emergency Response Program and USAID’s Community Stabilization Program had violence-reducing effects because “reconstruction money works when projects are small, troops have a good working relationship with noncombatants, projects are chosen in consultation with local officials, programs are administered by local contractors, and a provincial reconstruction team is nearby to provide guidance.”⁵²

There are, therefore, two very important conclusions to consider. First, absorptive capacity as correlated with skill sets will be a key factor in determining success. Projects should be undertaken only as necessary skills are reasonably available, and it should not be expected that they will appear by magic in a war-torn environment.

Equally if not more importantly, a critical element of review prior to undertaking major efforts should be to determine if they will themselves contribute to problems, and significant thought should be given to

the actual impact of the supposed benefits. Uncontrolled project spending can often be a gateway for creating corruption as various persons and groups seek to divert monies from intended uses. High pay scales utilized by outside interveners can undercut the local economy through wage scale differentials. Such differences can create competition for skilled persons so that few or no projects have enough, and capable host nation individuals can be diverted away from critical governmental and host nation businesses to pursue high wages outside intervener projects. In short, putting large amounts of money quickly into an underperforming or broken economy can create undue and unfulfilled expectations and thereby undercut the legitimacy and/or competency of both the host nation and the outside interveners. Another way to say this is that while any individual line of effort might be thought to be positive, its synergistic impact needs to be considered, rather than its stand-alone consequences.

The corruption point needs especially to be considered. It is one thing to have projects that simply do not work. But it is quite another when corruption skews the motivations of important actors. When the state is seen as a resource provider fundamentally subject to corrupt manipulation, multiple actors will have greater motivation to maintain the unsatisfactory state of the continuing conflict than to move toward a solution that will provide less economic incentive for them. The practical conclusion is that, in the context of an irregular conflict, economic projects presumptively should generally be smaller in scale and locally led and implemented. Large-scale projects and projects led by foreigners are likely not to contribute to stability and even to be counterproductive. The presumption should therefore be against their

use unless and until the benefits can be clearly defined, the implementation scheme clearly set forth so that the prospects of success are reasonably high, and the types of problems described above have been considered and a determination made as to how to overcome them or to deal with such consequences.

That conclusion raises the important issue of the role of economics as an element in the resolution of irregular conflict. Key to this evaluation, as is implicit in the discussion above, will be the necessity of distinguishing among different types of conflicts and especially among different phases during a conflict. There is already a reasonably well-accepted understanding that “policy in the post-conflict phase needs to be distinctive” and to “show features which need to differ systematically from those appropriate for equally poor countries that are not post-conflict.”⁵³ However, recent work has started to distinguish stable postconflict situations from those where violence is ongoing. The value of economic aid differs substantially among such circumstances: “We find that aid is significantly positive in post-conflict situations; however, in violent post-conflict situations aid is negative.”⁵⁴ On the other hand, there are also important findings that technical assistance “is highly cost-effective,” especially given the “severe shortage of the [host nation] people qualified to implement reforms.”⁵⁵

To put all this together, an important conclusion can be drawn: there is no gainsaying the value of economic growth—both as an obvious benefit to individuals and as a factor preventing return to conflict. It is a critical element in dealing with irregular conflict. But large outside aid programs undertaken during significant violence appear often to be less beneficial (and potentially negative) than

technical assistance and policy and structural economic reform. Larger amounts likely will be better spent once violence has decreased and the capacity for appropriate use of funds and accountability for their expenditure has developed. The market can and should be developed as promptly as possible and should be encouraged through reform and technical assistance. Local projects through local institutions can have enormous value; but there should be great caution on large aid projects until appropriate governance institutions have been put in place.

Sanctuary. The importance of outside support to insurgents is hardly a new issue. As noted above, the United States has been

there is no gainsaying the value of economic growth—both as an obvious benefit to individuals and as a factor preventing return to conflict

on both the receiving and the giving side of this issue—on the receiving side in Vietnam, where the support came from the North and from outside countries, and on the giving side in Afghanistan, where the United States, in responding to actions of the Soviet Union, provided much of the outside support in cooperation with Pakistan.

This critical role of outside support in irregular conflict recently has been buttressed by a historical study of factors affecting success in counterinsurgency, which highlighted sanctuary as the one key factor that seems to have consequences disproportionate to all others. Specifically, the study found that the “ability of the insurgents to replenish and obtain personnel, materiel, financing,

intelligence and sanctuary (tangible support) perfectly predicts success or failure in the 30 COIN cases considered.⁵⁶ The study recognized that such support could be internal (from the population) or from external

the population is the center of gravity if the population is the primary source of insurgents' tangible support

sources and therefore “suggested an important caveat to population-centric COIN approaches: The population is the center of gravity if the population is the primary source of insurgents' tangible support. When insurgents' tangible support needs are being met elsewhere, a successful campaign will require additional areas of emphasis.”⁵⁷

Accordingly, the study concluded that when “insurgents' support comes from external actors . . . then approaches explicitly targeting that supply chain are necessary, along with efforts to win over the population.”⁵⁸

As a practical matter, there will always be an inclination to utilize military means to shut off outside support. While there are obvious reasons for this, neither the Vietnam nor the Soviet Afghanistan case gives much support for the overall efficacy of this approach—nor, as a further example, does the current situation in Afghanistan. As complicated as they may be, diplomatic efforts may also help reduce outside support—and the wicked problem issue of negotiations with an entity presumably holding a very different view of the circumstances of the irregular conflict should be advertently considered.⁵⁹ Most specifically, regional diplomacy on multiple vectors may be crucial to getting the supplying states to reduce their

support. While there may be circumstances where an announced negotiating table can be useful, classic quiet diplomacy utilizing bilateral efforts as well as those of allies, partners, and entities with common interests—some of which may not be governmental—all can have important roles to play.

Strategies of Imperfection

In dealing with irregular conflicts, it is easy enough to say what might be a highly desirable outcome, including which specific elements of the outcome are most sought after from a normative point of view, but the more important questions are what will work when the desirable is not obtainable—at least not in the short or medium term—and which elements are mutually supportive and which may actually undercut one another.

Absence of Legitimacy. A good way to begin this analysis is to consider the concept of legitimacy in an irregular conflict. The Counterinsurgency manual states that “legitimacy is the main objective.”⁶⁰ At one level, this hardly can be disagreed with. But even a short reflection generates recognition that if there is an irregular conflict, some entities must consider the government illegitimate; otherwise, the conflict would not occur. Thus, the real question becomes what the government must do to resolve the conflict when it is considered illegitimate by important stakeholders. The discussion above should have made clear that this is a complicated endeavor because there likely will be disagreements as to what legitimacy means in the context of the conflict and how best to achieve it. Furthermore, even if there were general consensus that some type of model would be legitimate, often the conflict has occurred because the government was far from achieving that model—and, to

reiterate, often there is no such consensus on the proper model.

Strategies of imperfection have to recognize the absence of consensus on even such basic goals as determining what constitutes legitimacy and yet move forward from there. What has been suggested up to now is that this type of problem fits the definition of a wicked problem and will require a combination of efforts to achieve success. While those efforts have largely been discussed above, it is useful to group them together to underscore what a strategy of imperfection consists of in the context of an irregular conflict. Fundamentally, it will require a multiphased approach involving thoughtful goal-setting and sophisticated execution of an interplay of substantive capabilities, resolution techniques, and behavioral concepts.

Multiphased Approach. Faced with the problem of an irregular conflict, policy decisionmakers will be required to make choices with consequences in the real world. Viewing such conflicts as wicked problems will cause the decisionmaker to understand that the right approach will be adaptive and continuing, and that it is imperative to take as broad a view as possible of the issues, recognizing the very different interests of the relevant stakeholders and expecting that the nature of the conflict and the particular solutions will change over time. It will still be important to deal with issues such as security and governance—as discussed above, to focus on those issues that led to “good enough” success in several irregular conflicts. But it will also be important to go beyond a linear and additive view of those subjects, and to instead pay great attention to the entirety of the problem, including its interdependencies and evolution as well as the continuing need to focus on

changing behavior. An integrated approach of combining thoughtful goal-setting with sophisticated implementation of substantive capabilities, resolution techniques, and behavioral concepts will enhance the prospects of achieving “good enough” resolutions. The elements of such an approach are set forth below.

Goal-setting—Understanding “Good Enough.” Goal-setting is both critical and highly complicated in irregular conflict. Two interlocking considerations make this

the policy decisionmaker needs to set sensible goals that give definition to the strategy

true. First, while the ideally desirable is easy enough to understand, real-world constraints generally make such resolutions highly improbable. Second, the multifaceted nature of irregular conflicts generally means that important stakeholders will have conflicting goals. The policy decisionmaker nonetheless needs to set sensible goals that give definition to the strategy. Without this, operations will have little strategic direction, and guidance will be lacking for the employment of necessarily limited resources. If, for example, a broad strategy simply seeks good security, governance, and economics, virtually any action can be justified under the rubric of effective implementation.

One good way for policymakers to undertake goal-setting in an irregular conflict is to look at multiple goals. An external intervener needs to consider what the impact will be outside the area of the conflict that is desired (for example, reducing international terrorism) and

in the host nation (which needs to control most of its territory), what the host nation sees as its goals (a particular type of state, certain types of relations with neighbors), and what the opposition and other relevant stakeholders seek. It is important to state very clearly

for historical and efficiency reasons, bureaucracies tend to be stovepiped

that the fact that there will almost certainly be conflicting goals—in a sense, that is the definition of an irregular conflict—does not mean that a policymaker has to accept a lowest possible denominator resolution. What it does mean, however, is that determining what an acceptable resolution is needs to take account of the interplay of goals, and that will affect how a strategy of multifactored elements will be put into play.

Synergy and Multiple Resolution Techniques. Analysis and history accordingly suggest that the different elements of an irregular conflict strategy can operate in a supportive fashion so that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. The benefits of synergistic actions in an irregular conflict context have been described in a prior Center for Naval Analyses (CNA) study:

Governance, security, economics, and reconciliation are intertwined in ways that cause outcomes to flow across all four areas simultaneously. Unless we fully understand the ways in which activities and decisions in one area influence, and are influenced by, those in the others, we run the risk of building programs that are internally inconsistent and fundamentally flawed. Alternatively, if we can develop an adequate understanding

*of the relationships between and among the areas, we can sequence and prioritize activities to optimize outcomes in a holistic and synergistic way.*⁶¹

The importance of such synergistic efforts as the CNA analysis was recently reinforced by the historical study, noted above, which found “COIN forces that realize preponderantly more good than bad practices win, and those that do not lose.”⁶² That study did not review as broad a set of factors as discussed herein—for example, not specifically discussing reconciliation or reintegration or negotiations. Nor did it weight the various factors. Nonetheless, while the study did not cover all aspects, its conclusion underscores the concept that a combination of factors is the right way to plan and implement irregular conflict efforts.⁶³ This is, of course, what wicked problem analysis teaches. And what the discussion in this article has shown is that a very broad set of multiple resolution techniques will be important to irregular conflict resolution.

First, it will be important to fully understand the problem and not to artificially limit it. For historical and efficiency reasons, bureaucracies tend to be stovepiped. Going “outside its lane” is generally looked upon as a bureaucratic failure, and protecting the bureaucracy’s “equities” is often deemed a success. Those actions run counter, however, to the need for a holistic look at an issue and an ability to devise solutions that meet the full problem. Importantly, resources follow bureaucratic lanes, and even when the need for a holistic solution is recognized, it often is the case that resources cannot be easily transferred to where they would have the greatest impact.

Second, in undertaking to generate “good enough” resolutions, keeping in mind the

competitive, collaborative, and authoritative aspects of a solution will allow for greater flexibility and more effective approaches. An irregular conflict often switches among competitive, collaborative, and authoritative solutions—thus, popular media analysis notwithstanding, changes in approach can be as much a sign of success as an indication of failure. Governance-building can be both collaborative and competitive, even simultaneously so, and yet be making overall progress. Collaborative actions such as negotiations can lead to agreement on authoritative techniques such as elections. Given the multiple stakeholders that likely will be involved in an irregular conflict, it seems probable that effective resolutions will involve the use of all three approaches.

Third, the problem of changing behavior is the critical element of resolving irregular conflict. Strategies that are directed to such behavior changes need to be advertently undertaken, keeping in mind the multiple divergent views that stakeholders bring to the problem. In this regard, there will be few, if any, strategies that do not include some risks. By way of example, outsider intervention itself often will generate host nation resentment and struggles for control; use of force and related techniques can generate population backlash since there inevitably will be civilian casualties; economic efforts, not properly calibrated, can lead to significant corruption; and the list can be extended. But despite the risks, steps need to be taken to cause stakeholders to change behavior so a resolution is possible. Affecting motivation is not easy, and it may be necessary to undertake, at least for a period, approaches that are in apparent conflict but that will change views so that a longer term resolution becomes possible. The long-term concepts of persistence and exhaustion also are important to generating changed behavior. Ultimately, irregular conflict involves stakeholders with varying degree of power—and causing changed behavior that allows those different elements to converge on an overall acceptable resolution—likely not perfect from any single perspective—is the essence of generating strategies of imperfection to resolve the wicked problem set proposed by irregular conflicts. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ “Wicked problems” are problems made difficult because of, among other things, contradictory and changing requirements, complex interdependencies, multiple stakeholders, solutions that are neither right nor wrong, and conditions where the effort to solve one aspect of the problem may reveal or create other problems.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 578–584.

³ United States Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (1940).

⁴ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International Paperback, 1964).

⁵ See generally Field Manual 3–24, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication 3–33.5, *Counterinsurgency* (2006).

⁶ USAID Office of Transition Initiatives, *Lessons Learned, Counterinsurgency Programming* (2009), 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1. See also USAID, *A Guide to Economic Growth in Post-Conflict Countries* (2009).

⁸ See Raphael S. Cohen, “A Tale of Two Manuals,” *PRISM* 2, no. 1 (December 2010), 87–99.

⁹ *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (January 2009).

¹⁰ Ibid., 46–47. In a 50-page text, the section labeled “Implementation” is 5 lines long—and in the longer section on planning, there is only the statement that there should be “detailed descriptions” of the “Major mission elements and essential tasks (the ‘how’ for COIN operations).”

¹¹ Paul, Clarke, and Grille, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Barbara, CA: RAND, 2010), xvi.

¹² Stephen J. Hadley memorandum to the President (November 29, 2006), accessed at <www.nytimes.com/2006/11/29/world/middleeast/29mtext.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>.

¹³ See, for example, “As U.S. Assesses Afghan War, Karzai a Question Mark,” *The Washington Post*, December 13, 2010, A1.

¹⁴ Counterinsurgency manual, 1–26.

¹⁵ *The New York Times*, December 3, 2010, A1.

¹⁶ Ibid., A10.

¹⁷ Quoted in Chatterjee, “Policing Afghanistan: How Afghan Police Training Became a Train Wreck,” March 21, 2010, accessed at <www.cbsnews.com/stories/2010/03/22/opinion/main6321401_page2.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>.

¹⁸ Perito, “Afghanistan’s Police” (August 2009), 7.

¹⁹ See Dempsey, “The Role of Non-state Security Actors in Security Sector Reform,” and Metrinko, “Non-State Actors and Security in Afghanistan,” in *Civil Power in Irregular Conflict* (2010).

²⁰ Flynn and Pottinger, *Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan* (2010), 7.

²¹ NATO Training Mission–Afghanistan, *Year in Review* (November 2010), 3.

²² “Program Aims to Rebuild Afghan Police Force, Repair Its Image,” *The Washington Post*, March 10, 2010.

²³ *The Report of the Independent Commission on the Security Forces of Iraq* (September 2007), 8–10.

²⁴ White House report (September 2010), 14.

²⁵ Nancy Roberts, “Wicked Problems and Network Approaches to Resolution,” *International Public Management Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), 1.

²⁶ Commonwealth of Australia, “Tackling Wicked Problems: A Public Policy Perspective,” *Australian Public Service Commission* (October 25, 2007), 3–4, available at <www.apsc.gov.au/publications07/wickedproblems.htm>.

²⁷ Ibid., 12.

²⁸ Ibid., 11–12.

²⁹ Roberts, 2.

³⁰ Commonwealth of Australia, 11.

³¹ There is no dearth of practical examples. For one good short description, see, for example, Shuja Nawaz, *Pakistan in the Danger Zone: A Tenuous U.S.-Pakistan Relationship* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2010).

³² Roberts, 4.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Ibid., 7.

³⁷ The Colombian government called it “clear, hold, consolidate.” Government Accountability Office, “PLAN COLOMBIA: Drug Reduction Goals Were Not Fully Met, but Security Has Improved; U.S. Agencies Need More Detailed Plans for Reducing Assistance” (2008), 13.

³⁸ Ibid., 22.

³⁹ Ibid., 17; “Plan Colombia’s goal of reducing the cultivation, processing, and distribution of illegal narcotics by targeting coca cultivation was not achieved.”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁴¹ Kenneth J. Menkhaus, “State Fragility as a Wicked Problem,” *PRISM* 1, no. 2 (2010), 97.

⁴² Galula, 77. He called it the “favorable minority.”

⁴³ Of course, the groups not chosen will have concerns.

⁴⁴ For example, divided government under the U.S. Constitution.

⁴⁵ Sarah Ladbury, *Testing Hypotheses on Radicalization in Afghanistan* (2009); see Franklin D. Kramer et al., “Succeeding in Irregular Conflict: Effective Civil Operations,” in *Civil Power in Irregular Conflict* (Washington, DC: CNA, 2010), 28.

⁴⁶ Nenad Dimitrijevic and Petra Kovacs, “Managing Hatred and Distrust: Changes from the Bottom and the Top,” in *Managing Hatred and Distrust: The Prognosis for Post-Conflict Settlement in Multiethnic Communities in the Former Yugoslavia*, ed. Nenad Dimitrijevic and Petra Kovacs (Hungary: Open Society Institute, 2004), xxiv.

⁴⁷ Simonsen, “Addressing Ethnic Divisions in Post-Conflict Institution-Building,” *Security Dialogue* 36, no. 3 (2005), 298.

⁴⁸ Chauvet, Collier, and Duponchel, “What Explains Aid Project Success in Post-conflict Situations?” 12.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12, 14.

⁵⁰ Berman, Felter, and Shapiro, “Constructive COIN,” *Foreign Affairs* (June 1, 2010), available at <www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66432/eli-berman-joseph-h-felter-and-jacob-n-shapiro/constructive-coin>.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid. There are important questions whether CERP projects generally or under what conditions have carry-over economic benefits, as opposed to their value in violence reduction—but the violence reduction benefits would be good reasons to undertake them.

⁵³ Paul Collier, “Post-Conflict Economic Recovery,” International Peace Academy, April 2006, 1, available at <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~econpco/research/pdfs/IPA-PostConflictEconomicRecovery.pdf>>.

⁵⁴ Hoeffler, Ijaz, and Billerbeck, “Post-Conflict Recovery and Peacebuilding,” October 2010, 22.

⁵⁵ Collier, 8.

⁵⁶ Paul, Clarke, and Grille, xxii.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., xxvi.

⁵⁹ It is notable neither the Counterinsurgency manual nor the current U.S. Afghanistan/Pakistan unclassified strategic documents explicitly discuss the outside support problem. There is no doubt that U.S. leaders are well aware of such issues both generally and in the Afghanistan/Pakistan context, and the Afghan government has regularly identified Pakistan sanctuary for the Taliban as an issue that needs resolution. The broader point is that dealing with sanctuary needs to be part of the full spectrum of considerations under the wicked problem analysis.

⁶⁰ Counterinsurgency manual, 1–21.

⁶¹ Kramer et al., 29.

⁶² Paul, Clarke, and Grille, xxii.

⁶³ Ibid., xvii. The study considered the following three categories of “good practices”:

- ❖ COIN force—sufficient intelligence; sufficient strength to keep insurgents as guerrillas; air dominance; avoid collateral damage; used strategic communications; sought positive relations with population; established and then expanded secure areas; provided or ensured basic services in areas it controlled; significantly reduced tangible insurgent support
- ❖ Government—legitimate; at least partial democracy; competent; short-term investments, improvements in infrastructure or development, or property reform in areas controlled by COIN force
- ❖ Population—perception of security created in area controlled by COIN force; majority of population in conflicted areas supported or favored the COIN force.